Changing Culture

TONY WALSH

> There are outsiders always. These stars –
> These iron inklings of an Irish January,
> Whose light happened
> Thousands of years before
> Our pain did: they are, they always have been
> Outside history.
> Eavan Boland (1944-)

Culture, change and learning are recurring topics in transcultural development. This chapter uses material drawn from theorists, in conjunction with quotations from those who took part in interviews about the the experience of transcultural congregations,[1] to explore these areas.

Travellers to other countries when entering into a real engagement with the cultures they meet abroad, often report themselves profoundly changed by such encounters. Similarly, those involved in developing transcultural community, experience comparable transformations as they enter co-operative relationships with those of other cultures. Previously existing world views, meaning systems and accustomed behaviours experience challenge, often resulting in the development of new ways of seeing and inhabiting the world. Interviews with people involved in transcultural communities display a sense of enthusiasm and excitement, with moments also of challenge and frustration. At the core of their comments lies a conviction that transcultural development is not a process of newcomers adapting to a Eurocentric cultural milieu, or a melting pot where difference is reduced to the lowest common denominator. Instead, it is about the creation of something much more radical: a new way of being community where difference is both acknowledged and honoured. In this exciting and challenging process an awareness of what consti-

---

1. Quotations from interviews with people involved in transcultural congregations are printed in italics within a box.

tutes cultural difference, an understanding of how people and groups negotiate change and a sensitivity to the potential and difficulties involved in new learning are important topics for exploration.

Cultural difference implies far more than a different language and some unexpected behaviours; at a much more radical level it can entail a completely different understanding of the world, and a totally different range of assumptions about ethics, relationships and priorities. When individuals from ethnically or nationally disparate backgrounds are working together towards developing common goals, an understanding of what is embedded within the idea of *culture*, and of how *cultural difference* operates can be of great assistance.

In a different but related context, every group or organisation, irrespective of its ethnic background or location, has its own particular subculture or collection of mindsets which are separate from but not unrelated to the wider cultural milieu in which the organisation exists. The idea of culture is also useful in teasing out the elements of these microclimates which largely dictate the ways of thinking, the accepted behaviours and the vision for future development which exist within any group.

Operating with a transcultural agenda invites a sensitivity to and an understanding of culture at both these levels.

Secondly there are a number of stages and a range of tasks involved in the evolution of transcultural community. While these may vary from context to context, interviews wirth members of transcultural communities suggest that they tend to imply varying levels of *change* for all those most closely involved. Consequently it is important to be aware of the dynamics of change, what it implies and how people tend to respond to it. This in turn invites a consideration of how best to support and facilitate the change process for individuals as well as for communities.

Lastly, a number of those interviewed referred to the amount of new *learning* involved in transcultural endeavour. Consequently an appreciation of the nature and process of learning seems important for those involved in the development of transcultural community.

This chapter explores aspects of these areas by drawing on the disciplines of cultural studies, change management, organisational studies and learning theory to offer some ideas which may be of use to transcultural congregations and others involved in similar work. A greater

understanding of issues which they are likely to arise, or may already have arisem can prove a useful resource in anticipating or resolving some of the difficulties which are part of any creative enterprise. Having a fresh awareness of both the resources as well as the pitfalls can facilitate more realistic strategic planning for any development project. One person involved in a transcultural congregation pointed out: 'Develop loose and fluid structures that support what's happening rather than clinging to those you've inherited from the past or from the denomination. If something isn't working ditch it'.

CULTURE

> *It's only if we listen carefully, caringly and non-judgementally that we will learn about the other. This is particularly so when dealing with people of a different culture. It's only through really hearing their stories and experiences and their values that you can begin to…get some sense of their culture, their world of beliefs and assumptions.*

As already suggested, the concept of culture can be addressed in two particular ways. The first involves considering the notion at a macro level where it is seen as a framework through which to explore the differing values, customs and ways of making sense of the world which distinguish one national or ethnic group or tribe from another. Every national or tribal group has a particular range of behaviours, meanings and priorities that make it different from other groups. These understandings and reactions are core to how it manages both its internal and external relationships. They includes a group's unique, shared ways of making sense of the world and their ways of interpreting the meanings of life and death.

Coming to an accurate understanding of such nuanced and often slippery assumptive worlds and ways of making meaning is not easy. Yet gaining some kind of a map of how different peoples think, react and prioritise is vital to creating understanding and co-operation between two or more groups coming from different ethnic backgrounds. At a practical level in transcultural endeavours it is important to understand why another cultural group may behave in a particular way, and to understand the range of meanings that this behaviour implies. It is of course equally important for incomers to become aware of the host country's culturally defined

behaviours and reactions and what these may mean.

Observers will often comment on the startling differences which exist between congregations or sub-groups despite their coming from similar social and denominational backgrounds. They comment on differing levels of friendliness, creativity, conservatism or liberalism, spontaneity or formalism as well as the quality and degree of connection with the wider community. The term 'culture' can also be used at this more localised, or micro level, to describe the internal climate or the shared mental models which characterise such a community. This climate shapes and influences the behaviours and priorities of the group and its members along certain lines. It also informs the groups' sense of its own role, identity and purpose. Exploring the concept of congregational culture will often explain why a particular avenue of development will be welcomed by one community and shunned by another, or why a new proposal may be welcomed by one and given short shrift by another.

> *We were at an African birthday party; it seemed very familiar to anyone Irish; all the women were in the kitchen and all the men in the front room. They were chatting together and the young boys were in a separate group at the back of the room. During a pause in the conversation, unusual at any African social event, (I think everyone was a bit worn out from the strain of translating into English for my benefit), you could hear all these little African lads talking about football, and their teams. But it was GAA they were talking and in strong Dublin accents. You could sense a sudden change in the quality of the men's silence, and in their faces as they listened to their sons' conversation. There was a huge pause in that room; it was as though the world stood still. For me it felt like trespassing on a moment of revelation. Through it I had a dramatic encounter with what it means to loose your culture.*
>
> *I think out of the blue those men were faced, in a very stark way with the reality that whatever happened, their sons could never be African in the way that they themselves were.*
>
> *Sometimes for better or worse there is no going back.*

Macro-cultures

We frequently use the word 'culture' as being limited to such pursuits as art, music and literature. It is much more useful, and more accurate

to suggest that culture is a socially constructed range of lenses through which members of a society learn to interpret and respond to the events around them. Members of any particular cultural group, largely unconsciously, buy into this set of lenses which organise and to a large extent dictate their assumptions, values and behaviours. Colin Lago notes:

> Culture is socially transmitted and profoundly affects our ways of seeing and thinking about the world, of understanding relationships among people, things and events, of establishing preferences and purposes, and of carrying out actions and pursuing goals.[2]

The central structures of any society, its political and educational institutions, legal and religious establishments and its family structures have a significant role to play in reinforcing these powerful norms. Frequently, members of a culture are unaware of the actual practices through which they are socialised into a particular set of norms. The process is often so successful that those who share the same cultural background tend to assume unquestioningly their particular range of beliefs and behaviours are the 'only' way, at very least the 'best' way of viewing reality or of living life. Frequently, they are unaware of the power of the constraints under which they operate. Often it is only in meeting with members of a very different culture that people begin to compare and question, and ultimately to recognise the particular range of assumptions and behaviours which comprise the bedrocks of their own culture.

Any society schools its members to emphasise particular values and underplay others. Certain ways of thinking, certain ways of interpreting events and situations are seen as valid; others are not. Actions and behaviours flow from these powerful filters. Such aspects of culture exist at a number of levels, some of which are conscious, others unconscious; some clear, visible and explicit, others more hidden and implicit.

Language, customs, social rituals around birth, marriage or death, history and folklore are easy enough to observe. We may experience these as variously fascinating, mysterious or just plain inconvenient. The greater problem tends to occur however with those aspects of culture which are less visible. These include verbal and non-verbal communica-

2. Colin Lago, *Race, Counselling and Culture*, 1996, Buckingham: Open University Press, p. 33.

tion style, ordering of priorities, role expectations and definition of effi-
ciency. For instance, a small Nigerian boy, being upbraided for poor
homework in a Dublin school met the overworked teacher's onslaught
with silence and downcast eyes. Later, in describing the incident the
teacher defined the child as not only disobedient and troublesome (be-
cause of the lack of homework) but also as sullen and shifty. 'He went
into a sulk; he couldn't even meet my eyes.' The small boy was in fact
acting with utmost politeness according to the dictates of his home cul-
ture. He had been taught the rudeness of ever making eye-to-eye contact
or of justifying himself to any authority figure. Both pupil and teacher
were trapped into reacting according to the behavioural and interpre-
tive lenses of their own cultural worlds. And neither seemed able or per-
haps willing to peer around the edges of those filters to experiment with
different interpretations or behaviours.

Like the teacher and the small boy, people and groups from a com-
mon culture tend to act unquestioningly in the range of ways that they
have been taught, never thinking to question how these might be expe-
rienced or interpreted by those from a different culture. Equally, like
the teacher, they will tend to interpret the behaviours and reactions of
others according to the lenses of their own habitual assumptions, rarely
pausing to wonder whether behaviours or reactions might have a differ-
ent meaning to the one which they ascribe.

Being the host, and hence the dominant culture in this country, Irish
people are probably particularly prone to assume unquestioningly the
validity of their accustomed range of behaviours, reactions and interpre-
tations, rarely taking time to explore how these may be experienced by
newcomers. This may well have been reinforced in recent years by an
increasingly Eurocentric mindset which has at its core values such as
time-keeping, efficiency, worth and success. This set of values is profoundly
different to the culture and mindsets of many African and Asian ethnic
groupings. Because the Eurocentric values tend to reside at a level of
sub-consciousness we are only dimly aware of them and hence we tend
to act 'as if' they were totally and unquestionably valid.

On the other hand, people coming into Ireland will tend both to act
out of and interpret the actions of others according to the assumptive
world of their home culture. They may rarely pause either to reflect on
or question how their accustomed ways of behaving may be perceived by
the majority, or indeed by other ethnic minority groups with whom they
now come into contact.

It follows that when individuals or groups from radically differing cul-
tures meet that there is room for misunderstandings and confusion on a
grand scale. When members of such diverse groupings come together
with the aim of evolving into a transcultural community, albeit on the
basis of their shared Christian commitment, it would be optimistic to
suggest that the process would be without moments of misunderstand-
ing and complexity.

Contradictory Culture

*Three or four families, the core of a small Methodist Church, had become
very involved in developing relationships with the thirty or so Congolese
and Angolan asylum seekers who had joined the fellowship. They regularly
invited the newcomers to their homes, hosted Christmas parties, summer
barbeques and embarked on joint outings to the countryside and to historic
sites to give a wider sense of Ireland and to create common ground for con-
versation. In time it appeared that a number of solid new relationships were
being built. After a number of years most of the African families were moved
out of the hostels where they were initially accommodated and were allocated
their own houses by the Department of Social Welfare. As time passed, the
Irish group were at first mystified, and then hurt and inclined to
withdraw...not one of them had received an invitation to the new homes.*

*What looked like the development of a small but significant impasse was
only averted when one family shared their sense of hurt with the African
family to whom they were closest. It emerged that the Africans too had been
mystified, and indeed somewhat hurt that their new friends had not taken
time to visit them in their new homes.*

*The explanation was quite simple: in Congolese or Angolan culture hon-
our is conferred by visiting; it is not deemed to be real friendship if you have
to await an invitation. In current, though not necessarily past Irish cul-
ture, the honour is conferred through receiving an invitation. It would be
considered somewhat impolite to 'invite oneself'. The Irish were waiting to
be invited; the Africans were waiting to be visited; meanwhile the begin-
nings of a divide was emerging, whose source was individuals using their*

own cultural frame of reference to interpret the actions of others. It did not help that Irish culture and to a lesser extent Congolese and Angolan cultures are all somewhat reticent about actually 'naming' issues; this allowed the impasse to grow.

Questioning and exploring rather than assuming the meaning behind a behaviour or range of behaviours, and being conscious of the norms and expectations of a culture, including one's own, is important in multi-cultural engagement.

Learning to Live with Cultural Difference

Cultures are different for a whole variety of reasons having to do with things as diverse as geography, history and climate. Transculturalism promotes the expression and celebration of difference. It encourages groups from different cultures not just to find ways of co-existing but to recognise and be enriched by the diversity of each others' traditions, perceptions and values. This is not as simple as it sounds in the practical business of every day living. Major difficulties can occur when trying to achieve a goal or accomplish a task because different cultures make varying assumptions about how to proceed, the exact nature of the job to be done, and how best to achieve an end result. There are no guaranteed formulae for avoiding such difficulties, however there are a number of useful steps to minimise the difficulties involved.

Acknowledge and explore difference: The first major step is to acknowledge that different cultures will have very different ways of thinking and doing. It is worth investing time in getting to know exactly what these differences are and how they affect behaviours, priorities and the definition of goals and roles. Acknowledging and understanding differences is always more productive than fighting them or alternatively ignoring them and becoming frustrated.

Recognise that no culture has all the answers: Every culture is inclined to assume that its way of thinking, behaving or prioritising is the correct one. Even if these assumptions are not made explicit, they tend to operate quite powerfully as unquestioned realities at an implicit or unspoken level. Acknowledge that no one culture (even yours!) has the monopoly on the most valid ways of approaching life.

Recognise your cultural biases: Recognise that your normal way of doing

things, of prioritising, or of reacting probably comes from exposure to your own culture. Appreciate that another culture may have a different way of looking at a task or indeed a completely different way of ranking the priorities.

Explore your own cultural assumptions: Become aware of the hidden or semi-hidden range of assumptions which underlie the behaviours, reactions and interpretations of your own cultural group.

Stand in the others' cultural shoes: Learn to use your imagination to understand the perspectives and the behaviours of those from another culture.

Nurture good relationships: There is nothing to beat open and honest relationships where perceived differences can be acknowledged and explored. Regular discussion of difference, gentle, respectful questioning and an acknowledgement and sharing of any difficulty can all yield positive results. If you don't understand: ask!

In summary, every transcultural congregation needs to put time aside for the following tasks:

- Spend time getting to know about each others cultures, history, traditions.
- Acknowledge together that there may be differences in ways of seeing and doing.
- Examine how these may/will affect behaviours, reactions, interpretations and hence relationships.
- Explore how the different cultures deal with anger and frustration.
- Recognise that cultural difference will tend to affect vision, goals and work pace.
- Imagine together where the difficulties are most likely to arise and for whom.
- Plan how to acknowledge and resolve issues.
- Organise regular occasions where the different cultures can meet, share and discuss.

I think there were – and continue to be – three major challenges in developing transcultural congregations. The first is to integrate aspects or styles of worship that are part of new as well as original members' spirituality, thereby allowing everyone to feel at home at some point in the service. I've seen this

> *done in other integrating Churches, through the use of a variety of forms of music, or through spontaneous prayer as well as in other ways; I envy the fact that their leaders have had the insight to enable this to happen. We have done virtually nothing in this regard. The second challenge is to talk and share much more. There are so many things that need to be talked about so that misunderstandings arising from cultural differences do not arise, or can be resolved. We need to provide a forum where things can be discussed. Thirdly there is a challenge to see that new people make the move from "welcome visitors" to members of the congregation. In this respect I got enormous pleasure from overhearing a Cameroonian member welcoming a stranger to the church recently.*

Micro-cultures and sub-cultures

Groups who spend time together often begin to behave like – rather large – families. There are many similarities between families and groups, and no two are ever exactly alike. Each has its own micro-culture woven from the interaction of a number significant strands. For instance, every family has a range of explicit *rules* which define the range of behaviours and values that are acceptable as well as an assortment of implicit or unspoken rules and values. While the latter are largely unspoken they can be very powerful. The fact that they are unspoken can often make them all the more difficult to challenge. Both explicit and implicit rules vary radically from household to household and from group to group.

Families also have a variety of explicit *roles*; for instance the roles of father, mother, eldest and youngest sibling, grandparents, cousins, and so on. The function, or what is expected of these roles varies from family to family. For instance, in one, the mother role involves the functions of emotional supporter, housekeeper, financial manager, decision-maker and wage-earner. In another household the mother role may have a lot fewer functions attached, and the father or an older child or a member of the extended family network such as a grandmother may fulfil some of these functions.

Likewise in a Church group or congregation the role of minister may actually include among others the functions of pastor, evangelist, prime decision-maker, administrator and financial controller, while in another congregation the minister is primarily preacher and pastor. Functions

relating to administration, decision-making, evangelism and finance are held by other leaders. How a congregation customarily divides up these and other functions, and the personality and vision of those it chooses to fulfil them will feed into the development of a unique local culture as well as dictating what tasks are seen as necessary to be undertaken and how these are accomplished.

There are also implicit roles in every family. The fact that these are often unnamed this does not mean that they are any the less powerful. These include, among others, the carer, who tends to looks after everyone; the stirrer, who always questions; the mascot who represents the family ideal; the scapegoat who is customarily blamed, and the peacekeeper, always striving to smooth things over. Such roles, rarely acknowledged explicitly, are also a part of other human groups. Their existence and the personality of those who occupy them will significantly influence the life and sub-culture of a community or congregation.

Families also have their own individual rituals or ways of doing things; they have the stories they tell about themselves and the boundaries that regulate the ingress or egress of new people or ideas. All these are intimately connected to the prevailing sense of how a group identifies itself.

They are also significant realities in other human groups and together with the perception of its own history all feed into the creation of the subculture of a community or congregation. The resulting 'climate' will tend to define how a group sees itself and how it defines its role in society or wider community. From this will flow the activities in which it engages, the level and quality of participation allowed and the ease with which newcomers are assimilated. For instance, a group or congregation who sees its role as narrowly evangelistic will be unlikely to be involved in primarily political or justice related activities. The culture or climate will also influence how conflict and disagreements are handled; whether they are acknowledged and worked through or ignored and left to fester.

> *Eliciting a congregation's sub-cultural map*
> *Using observation and question try to uncover the following:*
> - *What are the most common stories told about the congregation by members? By outsiders?*
> - *Who seems to be most respected in the congregation? Why? What does*

this reveal about its attitudes and values?
- *What may the answers to both these questions suggest about the congregations' priorities, dreams, aspirations?*
- *What adjectives are most commonly used by members, and then outsiders, to describe the congregation?(eg warm, staid, enthusiastic, socially aware, strict, open, etc.)*
- *How does the congregation tend to deal with difficulties, disagreements or crises?*
- *What people or behaviours does the congregation consider deviant or unacceptably different? How does it deal with these?*
- *What seem to be the most important rules in the congregation… Explicit?… Implicit?*
- *What rituals or symbols (or lack of them) seem particularly important to this congregation? What may these be saying?*
- *What does the congregation say about its mission and priorities… Explicitly?… Implicitly? Do its activities, buildings, services support this?*

An experience illustrates a number of these elements. A group of new members joined a warm but rather traditionally minded evangelical Church with a strong sense of its Reformed identity. Some of the newcomers were from Africa, others Irish, but originally Catholic. A new minister, himself from overseas and with a rather dominant style of leadership, decided that it would be appropriate to have a large cross on the front of the church building and a lighted candle on the communion table. These suggestions were enthusiastically backed by the new members. The ideas were received, however, with quiet horror by many original members who because of a rather turbulent recent history, tended towards a culture best defined as 'don't rock the boat'. After the initial shock had worn off they reluctantly agreed to the proposal. While they could think of many reasons based in tradition to oppose the suggestions, none of these seemed logical or reasonable enough for open debate without the possibility of serious misunderstanding. The cross and candle went ahead. The discomfort of the older members was never explicitly acknowledged. Instead, it was implicitly expressed through an atmosphere of negativity and quiet unresponsiveness.

Mapping the explicit and implicit rules, roles, the accepted ways of

doing things, the attendant rituals and the boundaries, and they will be different in each congregation, will give a clear sense of what changes can be realistically achieved in a particular congregation at a particular time. It will also give some indicators as to how these changes may be best strategised. Deciphering the overall cultural map is important in the process of transcultural development for three reasons.

Firstly, it gives some sense of how a particular congregation will react over time to the range of changes which are central to transcultural development. Some changes can usually be achieved with ease. Others may be much more difficult. Some may be virtually impossible for a particular group at a particular point in time. Using force is the antithesis of transculturaism and may at worst ultimately culminate in the demise of a congregation.

Secondly, knowing and understanding a congregation's cultural map will provide a sense of how best to proceed with a particular programme of development. It will give clear indicators as to what works and how. It will provide information as to how to utilise the strengths and creativity of the group, the gifts of individuals or sub-groups in a way that is positive, productive and inclusive.

Lastly, the internal culture or climate of a congregation usually evolves over years in a largely unconscious process. At a time of change and growth there is an opportunity for the community to become involved in discovering for itself what is really important for them, and to consciously review and perhaps recreate or develop their culture in a new direction. The achievement of such significant change will need to be facilitated and supported through a range of appropriate structures, processes and activities.

CHANGE

Change is simultaneously exciting and perturbing. Processes of change and development are at the centre of creating transcultural communities. Accustomed ways of doing things shift, novel structures evolve and attitudes broaden to encompass new realities, new possibilities.

… transculturalism can appear as a major threat because its about change at all sorts of levels… it implies different ways of worshipping, different

ways of doing things... new experiences of prayer... new ways of being a community. At the beginning it was all very scary... for many people the Church had become a bastion against change rather than a place for steps of faith.

Change is exciting and energising for many, inviting new possibilities and opening up new horizons. For others it can be very threatening, particularly if it is taking place in areas of life that are central or important to them. (It is no accident that change in religious structure or practice provokes such strong reaction; it does so precisely because this is an area important to many people's sense of identity and security). Hence:

So much of what we do in Churches is about preserving our comfort zones and not challenging the status quo.

It is useful to consider some common reactions to change and to look at some strategies for dealing with the resistance which it can sometimes evoke.

Many people tend to have considerable vested interest in preserving the familiar, if only because it *is* familiar and therefore predictable and safe, even if doesn't work too well. Hence they may fight hard to avoid any disruption to the status quo. This can be true even when the proposed changes seem to be quite in keeping with explicit principles and a named sense of vision. Resistance to change tends to exist at an emotional rather than at a cognitive level and so is not necessarily amenable to logical argument. To complicate matters further, reaction is often sourced at a subconscious level, leaving people unaware of the real source or strength of feelings and out of touch with the degree of resistance which change or challenge can provoke.

Interestingly, resistance to change is not limited to individuals or subgroups. Larger systems or organisations also tend to resist change and can be quite energetic in opposing or sabotaging anything that appears to be a threat to their usual way of being or to their accustomed way of doing things. This can be so even if the the proposed changes would make for a richer or more useful future.

Systems Theory recognises the prevalence and power of this propensity and calls it homeostasis. It suggests that homeostasis is the innate

tendency or drive of any individual, system or organisation to mobilise internal and external forces to re-balance itself back towards its accustomed or usual way of functioning, in reaction to the new or innovative. Systems thinkers suggest that such a propensity must be taken very seriously when contemplating or designing for change.

Some important conclusion arise: Firstly, while change is exciting it is also experienced by many as quite threatening and hence needs to be managed carefully and with consideration towards all involved. Secondly, resistance to change is quite normal; it often relates to people's rarely publicised fears and, despite appearances to the contrary, is usually not sourced in pure stubbornness. Thirdly, change and its implications cannot be easily compartmentalised: shift at one level often necessitates change at other levels too. Fourthly, the more important a group or organisation is to an individual, or the more they see themselves as identified with it, the stronger will tend to be their reaction. Lastly, it may not necessarily be the change *per se* that is the issue but people's *perception* of that change and how it may effect them, their roles and their sense of security. Such fears are often quite reasonable; as well as making life more exciting and stimulating for some change will invariably make it much more complicated, uncertain or difficult for others.

Researchers into human behaviour suggest that there are four possible types of change which impinge on those involved in groups or organisations:

- The first is change in the usual structures. This refers to change in areas such as external authority structures or internal organisational arrangements: committee structures, leadership systems and communication networks. It can also include changes in actual physical buildings.

- The second area is policy change: this includes important areas such as a change in mission statement, or in the focus of an organisation's task or reasons for being.

- The third, and the one which will tend to impinge on the largest number of people, is change in accustomed procedures, generally at a local level. In a Church context this may include changes in who is eligible for leadership, the criteria for membership, the establishment and constituency of sub-groups, the definition of their tasks and the

style and conduct of services. Alteration at this procedural level is probably the most visible or noticeable form of change. It is also the one which will tend to attract most reaction.

• The last and probably the most radical form of change is attitudinal; and this may be the slowest and most difficult shift to achieve. Behavioural scientists suggest that change in attitude is not necessarily a *sine qua non* for the other changes to take place: in fact it will often follow and be supported by change first accomplished at other levels. Attitudinal change is also peculiarly susceptible to positive role models, quality of relationship and inclusive leadership styles.

While these four categories are useful, the practical realities of any change process tends to be a lot less neat and watertight. Types of change tend to weave in and out of each other in an untidy and multi-faceted way. All this invites the conclusion that the intensity and indeed the rate of change need to be managed carefully. A key element in this management is an understanding of why people tend to fight shy of the phenomenon. Michael J Hicks a management consultant of international repute puts forward a number of specific reasons as to why people avoid or resist change in the systems of which they are a part. These reasons are very realistic and explain why resistance to change is really quite normal. People are reacting because they are fearful or because they feel everything is shifting too quickly or too radically. It is not necessarily because they are being awkward or cussed. He suggests that negative reaction to change is frequently sourced in the following:

• Fear of the unknown
• Lack of information
• Misinformation
• Historical factors
• Threat to one's core skills and competencies
• Threat to status
• Threat to power base
• Few perceived benefits
• Low trust in the organisational climate
• Poor relationships
• Fear of failure
• Fear of looking stupid

• Reluctance to experiment
• Bound to closely to tradition and custom
• Reluctance to let go

These reactions are very real; they often constitute very reasonable responses to possible change so it is important to recognise them and attend to them. As a result change needs to be managed carefully. Too much change too soon, or without adequate information may cause a counter reaction and reversal. Too little and nothing happens at all and the status quo remains virtually unaltered.

There will often be people who have had a lot of influence in running the Church for years. In small congregations you're often very dependant on individuals who have worked exceptionally hard for years to make the Church viable or indeed to keep it open and they can end up holding a lot of influence or indeed power. While such a level of commitment can be necessary to keep the doors open it is not always a good thing, because it entails those involved putting so much energy into the Church that they have little time for other interests and commitments and they become personally over identified with their role in the congregation. Of course its important to remember that this has been allowed to happen because it suited everyone else to let them get on with it… and this includes the Church authorities at both a local and Diocesan level. You can, not infrequently, end up with a situation where the only place that such a person now has influence or a meaningful role is in the Church. And of course when change happens they can become very threatened and resistant to anything that may disrupt this. If they are not flexible, or are very set in their way of doing things or are really wedded to holding onto their influence or power this can be a huge difficulty. Hence transculturalism can appear as a major threat because it's about change at all sorts of levels; it implies quite profound change in a Church. It can take time and the wisdom of Solomon to help people to let go, or to move over, or to engage in other ways of expressing themselves or of finding validation.

The action of developing transcultural communities involves constant change as people cope with finding new ways of doing things, develop new ways of relating to each other and learn to question old modes of behaviour. There are a number of useful ways of attending to the distur-

bance which such change can create. Thomas Cummings and Christopher Worley [3] in a recent book on change in organisations invite attention to three of these:

Empathic Listening: Firstly there needs to be a concern to listen to how people are experiencing the changes. The emphasis here is not just on hearing what people are saying but on eliciting what they may be *feeling*. This process will not only identify those who are having difficulty; it will also provide useful information about a wide range of issues related to the project. Moreover, when people are listened to carefully and non-judgementally, with a genuine concern to understand their views and feelings, they will tend to be much less defensive and much more willing to engage in constructive resolution of the issue to hand and more generally in an active ownership of the project.

Effective Communication: Secondly, people become restive, uncertain and hence resentful if they do not know what is happening. Rumour takes over and fears become rampant. Setting up clear channels of two-way communication, as well as honouring and utilising existing informal ones, is vital. These need to ensure that those involved understand what is happening or what is planned and have a clear method of feeding their views and questions back into the process.

Inclusion and Participation: Thirdly, people often resist because they feel excluded or out of control. One of the most efficient ways to overcome this difficulty is to involve members directly and from the outset in planning and envisioning for change. This not only provides a greater range of new ideas and perspectives it also involves people in the ownership and moulding of a shared purpose.

What is being advocated here is a shift from a 'top down' method of instituting change to a 'bottom up' approach, which privileges *consultation, transparency* and *participation*. This demands a transformation in the mindset of many leaders, from one which directs, to one which enters into co-operative engagement and dialogue. Traditionally, Churches of virtually all denominational backgrounds have tended to adhere to a very directive and hierarchical model of decision-making at both local and institutional levels. Consultation and participative management have

3. T. Cummings and C. Worley, *Organisation, Development and Change*, 2005, London: Thomson.

been honoured more in the breach than the observance. Leadership styles have often been authoritarian, if not autocratic, and decision making processes closed to scrutiny and review.

Developments in the theory and practice of organisational management emphasise that while these leadership attributes may have worked in the past they are not suited to the rapidly changing environment of the present. Community development theorists suggest that authoritarian and non-participative leadership and decision-making styles result in impoverished decision-making, disempowered communities and an alienated grass-roots. Both groups advocate the creation of institutional structures which privilege dialogue, participation and transparency as the most effectual and useful way for organisations to develop efficiently, ethically and productively. This fits with the core of transcultural development.

Central to this alternative position is a way of being rather than a set of tools or strategies. It underlines, instead, the importance of respectful engagement with as many individuals and subgroups of those involved as possible. It privileges consultation, feedback and a respect for difference which facilitates the emergence of a joint vision. It emphasises the importance of an ongoing review of decision making processes to insure their transparency. Working *with* a community to nurture the emergence of an inclusive picture of their future creates a climate of participation. This in turn minimises the threat element of transformation as it gives people information and a sense of control over the rate and agenda of change. It also tends to create a far more inclusive end product, incorporating the views, opinions and life experience of many people and a far richer process of development. Such a process will tend to reduce the disturbing elements of the changes, as those from many different backgrounds learn to relate, disagree and problem solve in a mutually enriching process, co-creating multiculturalism as they go.

LEARNING

Engaging in new learning seems to be an important part of the process of adaptation when a refugee or asylum-seeker begins to connect with their new environment. Sahr Yambasu was head of a theological college in his native Sierra Leone; when he came to Ireland the only

employment he could find at first was as a part-time worker in an abattoir. He describes the central moment of transformative learning which occurred for him. Finding himself in a new and alien culture, he re-evaluated his view of himself and his circumstances. This moment of insight led to a profound change that allowed him to connect positively with the challenges of the new context:

> It was the dawn of a new day of seeing and being. While I had experienced a physical border crossing, I was now on the verge of crossing another border…It ushered in a profound rethink on my circumstances.[4]

Radical educational theorists take the view that real learning is about entering a process which facilitates change in assumptions, prejudices and values. This in turn allows for the emergence of new ways of seeing, thinking and behaving. The crises experiences of life, or its times of challenge and difficulty, are seen as contexts in which much qualitative learning can take place.

The displacement which is at the core of the experience of becoming a refugee is one such context. It can result in moments of re-evaluation and growth.

Involvement in the co-construction of transcultural communities is less dramatic but, with its emphasis on creating real connection with those of radically different cultures, it often invites similar times of reflection and re-evaluation. Those involved will constantly find themselves catapulted into new or challenging experiences as they engage with others of different culture. Differences of expectation, misunderstanding of intention or behaviour and a challenge to one's accepted ways of seeing the world are all part of the picture.

Jack Mezirow, a leading theorist in Adult and Continuing Education, agrees that real learning involves more than the development of new sets of skills. At a much deeper level it calls on us to confront and question the assumptions and expectations which underlie our usual attitudes and behaviours. The new responses that are called for imply not

4. S. Yambasu, 'Interrogating Displacement' in A. Ryan A. and T. Walsh (eds.) *Frightening the Horses*, 2004, Maynooth: MACE, p. 38.
5. J. Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 1991, San Fransisco: Jossey Bass.

just the development of different ways of doing but different ways of thinking. They demand the deconstruction and re-making of pre-existing meaning systems as well as a revision of our usual ways of doing and being.

An Irish congregation moving from the position of 'doing for' to 'doing with' is one such example. It implies a huge shift in attitude, a letting go both of power, and a change in a familiar way of responding: this allows for the development of a new range of skills and behaviours:

> *Looking back at the transcultural developments in the Church, I suspect that one of the most significant, and one of the hardest things to do is to shift the mindset from 'doing for' to 'doing with' or indeed 'being with'. Doing for the other has become an accepted way in Western Christianity, it's the old charity model that assumes that I have the sweeties and that I can just give them to you because you've nothing. Its much more comfortable, because that way I can preserve the status quo, I don't have to get too close or too involved and of course that means that I retain the upper hand. It implies that you need my largesse, rather than recognising that while you may not have certain resources at present you have many, many others. Its much, much easier to give money or even to develop a support scheme of some kind, than to work with or explore what we can develop together. We did a lot of the former at the beginning and of course some of it may be necessary at the start but you must move because otherwise it creates huge dependency and fosters low self esteem. 'Doing for' doesn't honour the personhood of the other in the same way that entering into a relationship or working out the complexities of developing a co-operative project does. Its much, much harder to open your heart or open your home than it is to open your pocket.*

Transcultural development does not demand such radical shifts in every situation. Sometimes it is quite possible to take familiar skills or ways of seeing, believing and doing, and by extending these, or by building on their foundation, to develop a new range of responses, which will fit the new realities. Sometimes the demands are just too great, too much to contemplate and people retrench. A number of those interviewed noted the fear that is often experienced as members, leaders or ministers feel the safe and familiar slipping from their grasp. They commented

on the rationalisations or control mechanisms exercised in order to keep the unknown at bay.

The threat involved in new learning can be just too much and it becomes easier to ignore the demands of the new, to deny the necessity for change. The temptation then is to become busied with reassuring activities or to re-invest in behaviours and positions which reinforce a sense of personal or organisational power and control.

People interviewed also commented on the profound courage of many as they engage with the challenge of the new, as they enter the exciting waters of creating new ways of seeing and doing and making sense of the world. New learning can be very threatening, particularly when it involves not just 'doing' differently, but 'being' differently: there is something very unsettling for most of us in confronting our prejudices and our assumptions. Neither the traditional educational system nor the Churches – nor, indeed society at large – have been particularly enthusiastic about promoting this level of reflection and learning. As a result, it is often difficult for individuals or groups to know quite how to engage in these new levels of learning.

Leading writers on adult learning theory advance some useful guidelines here. D. Boud[6] suggests that a key to new learning which results in change is to engage in reflection. In his thinking this reflective practice has three stages for those engaged in learning.

Firstly, focus on significant life events or experiences, noticing your feelings, senses and observations;

Secondly, explore the wider ideological, organisational or cultural contexts of which these events or experiences are a part and note how the wider systems influence you. Notice too how your feelings influence your attitude to and handling of the systems.

Thirdly, consider how you could take the initiative, to intervene and create change in these wider contexts

Stephen Brookfield[7] proposes a similar model, suggesting that the process of critical reflection lies at the heart of learning and consequent change. He suggests that in the process of critical reflection, one's as-

6. D. Boud, R. Keogh and D. Walker (eds.), *Reflection: Turning Experiences into Learning*, 1989, London: Kogan Page.

7. S. Brookfield, *Developing Critical Thinkers*, 1987, San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass.

sumptions and presuppositions are first of all made conscious and then assessed for their appropriateness, accuracy or fit. When our underlying meaning schemes are made consciously explicit they no longer have the same power to control our thinking and can be changed in a conscious and rational way.

The idea of critical reflection can become a useful tool with which members of different groupings, or indeed any group or individual, can engage in an acknowledgement, exploration and critique of their own assumptive worlds and of the assumptions of the worlds and structures which they inhabit. This means that they 'go after' the maps of their automatic interpretations and reactions and allow them to emerge into consciousness. This allows individuals or groups to become aware of the frames of reference, meaning systems and presuppositions which they automatically employ to order and live life. Being aware of these does not necessarily mean having to change them; it does, however, provide an alertness as to why we may react in a certain mode in particular situations. This in turn allows the possibility of owning such reactions and of explaining them to others. It also allows them to be changed or modified if this seems appropriate.

Critical reflection also means interrogating the systems and organisations that are relevant, looking behind the façade, examining agendas, communication patterns, vision and mission statements. It means critiquing activities to see whether they are actually translating the values which they espouse into their everyday way of being in the world. It means exploring how they handle, use or abuse power.

This process was at the heart of the learning engaged in by a number of those interviewed:

> *What has shocked me is not the challenges encountered but my reactions, of being intolerant, of trying to maintain control … This has been very challenging for me personally; ministers are very invested in maintaining control. Some of it comes from the training and maybe some is due to the personality types that are selected for ministry. I have had to put a lot of work into learning to be more open, more flexible; to shifting my comfort levels, to let go of control.*

This quotation instances the use of reflection, focusing on the honest

appraisal of a personal experience, and using the process to create profound change in the individual's way of being.

> *Reflective process exercise*
> *Take a significant meeting/service/activity and ask the following questions of it:*
> *Why do we as a congregation conduct in this particular way?*
> *Whose reality or usual way of doing things does it privilege?*
> *Who benefits form things remaining as they are?*
> *Who does it include? Exclude?*
> *How may it appear to those of another culture?*
> *What meanings, values or cultural assumptions are embedded in it?*
> *What would have to change for it to become more inclusive? More participative?*
> *How could it become more meaningful for those of other cultures?*
> *Have they been consulted? Are they involved?*

Another respondent used a reflective process to acknowledge and analyse the feelings of frustration he was experiencing in his situation. After some reflection, he contextualised these feelings as a reaction to dynamics within the local Church system as it reacted against the changes inherent in transcultural development. This led him to a re-assessment and critique of the normal and accustomed modes of decision making in the denomination and to locate the local reactions as being related to the conservative agenda of the wider Church. It also alerted him to a fresh realisation of the power of the wider society's ideology to influence the systems within it, including the Church.

Such insights and the accompanying questioning attitude indicate an ability to acknowledge, analyse and critique which is core to new learning. It is about learning to see things as they are.

> *So many of our committees, rituals, offices and assemblies are about preserving the power and status of the denominational structure, or the elders or the clergy or the self, rather than about trying to follow Jesus effectively. Most particularly much of it is about preserving a very eurocentric value system which privileges individuality, success and certainty.*

> *Questions to promote Critical Reflection*
> *Why am I interpreting this person's behaviour in only this way?*
> *What might a more useful/positive/freeing interpretation?*
> *Why do I/we experience a strong reaction to a certain behaviour/event?*
> *Where do my/our reactions come from?*
> *Did they come from my/our expectations/wants being unmet?*
> *Were these expectations/wants reasonable? Useful?*
> *Had I/we made these clear to the others involved?*
> *What could I/we have done differently?*
> *How might the other person/group have interpreted my/our expectations?*
> *How can I/we involve the other individual/group in learning from this?*

> *Because we're so used to the assumptions that are involved we're inclined to accept things as they are without any real question. In fact things are 'as they are' because our society or our Church has chosen to construct its world and its priorities in a particular way. We need to be aware that there are always choices, always different ways of doing things or seeing things. Real intercultural engagement challenges us to realise that there are so many different ways of viewing reality, of prioritising, of doing things differently.*

The learning journey which is at the core of transcultural development calls on participants to extend their existing range of mind sets, responses and behaviours in order to fit with new experiences. At its centre however there is also a much deeper and more radical invitation which implies a questioning of the assumptions which lie at the base of both familiar culture and personal attitudes and reactions. Once this quite radical position has been assumed, it in turn tends to nurture a way of being in the world which is much less willing to allow the status quo of Church or state to go unchallenged and uncritiqued.

CONCLUSION

The development of transcultural community implies meaningful engagement between those whose life, experience, and ways of seeing and doing may be profoundly different. An understanding of the implications of cultural difference will be useful in highlighting or exploring areas of potential difficulty and as a basis for developing greater under-

standing. Those involved in transcultural engagement are involved in a journey which explores culture, encounters change and engages with new ventures in transformative learning. If this transaction is real, something core to individual and to group identity is changed. The world and the self can no longer be viewed as in the past.

Transculturalism, as defined by Anne Ryan[8] is a mode of connection or community which demands a meeting on equal terms. It honours equality, inclusivity and participation. It is a distinctive way of connecting, a way as Alan Martin points out, honoured by the New Testament Church.[9] At the core of transcultural engagement is an encounter with the other which seeks neither to change nor to judge, but to share and understand, to truly meet and learn of the other and to create the structures that will furnish the continuance of this process. To really meet the other is always to be changed at some deep level.

The process of transculturalism invites critical reflection not just on the individuals and congregations involved and their realities. It will also invite attention to anomalies, abuses and inequalities which are central to society and indeed to the Churches' ways of functioning. It remains to be seen whether these structures will respond appropriately.

> *Despite the very real challenges developing a transcultural congregation was, and continues to be a most profoundly rewarding pathway; really quite wonderfully enriching for the Church and for the individuals and families involved – although certainly a steep learning curve.*

8. See 'Levels of Engagement between Cultures', pp. 15-23, *supra.*
9. See 'The Ephesian Moment', pp. 24-77, *supra.*